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ABSTRACT

This guide offers students suggestions on keeping a journal in which they record what they do, think, and feel. The guide examines the purposes of keeping a journal; discusses writing to a correspondent who will respond to the journal entries; shows how to express thoughts and feelings about events instead of just reporting on the events; offers tips for organizing journal-keeping activities; gives suggestions for various writing forms; and lists numerous writing ideas. Sample journal entries are included. (GW)

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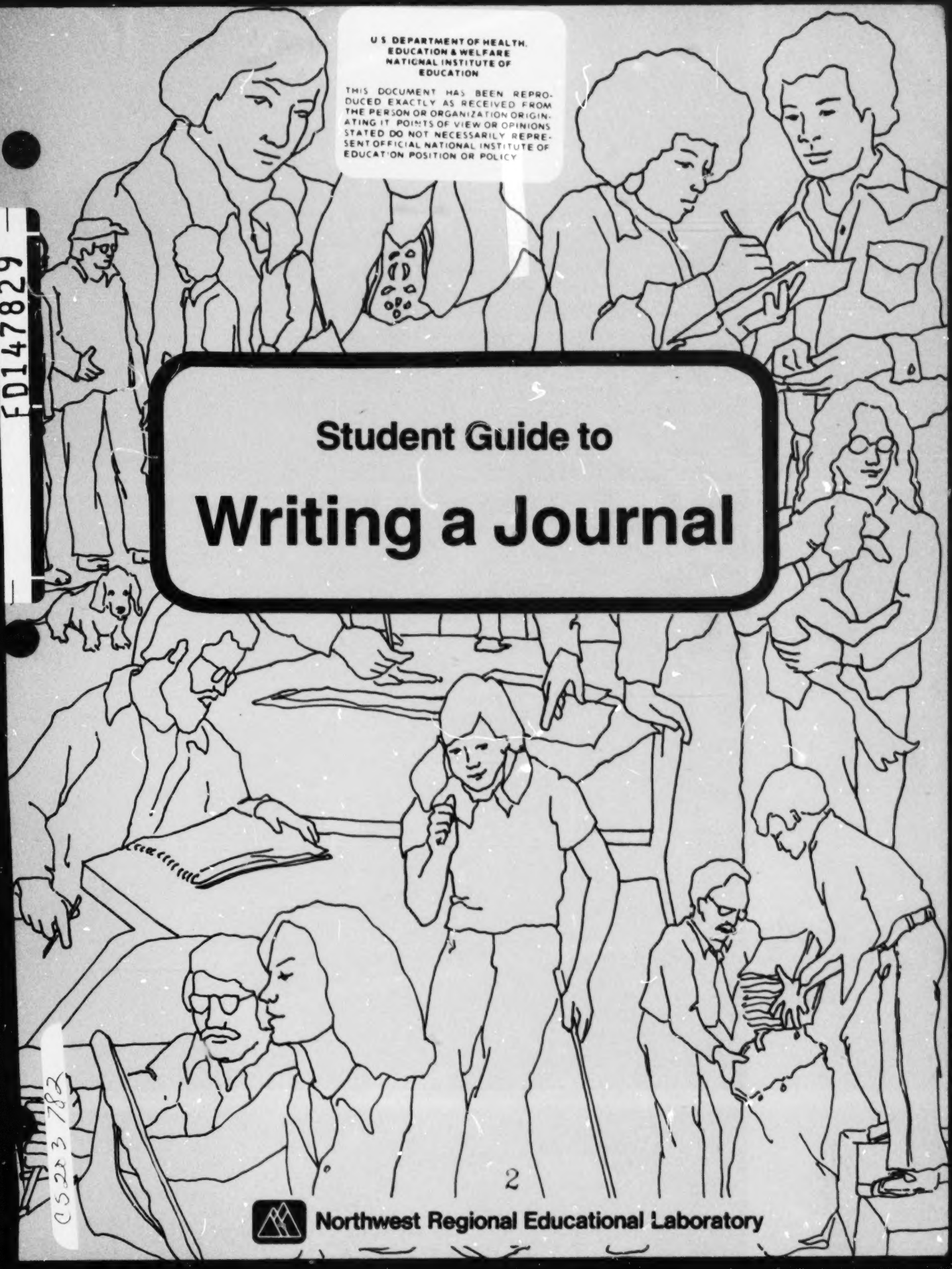

Student Guide to
Writing a Journal

CS203782

Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory

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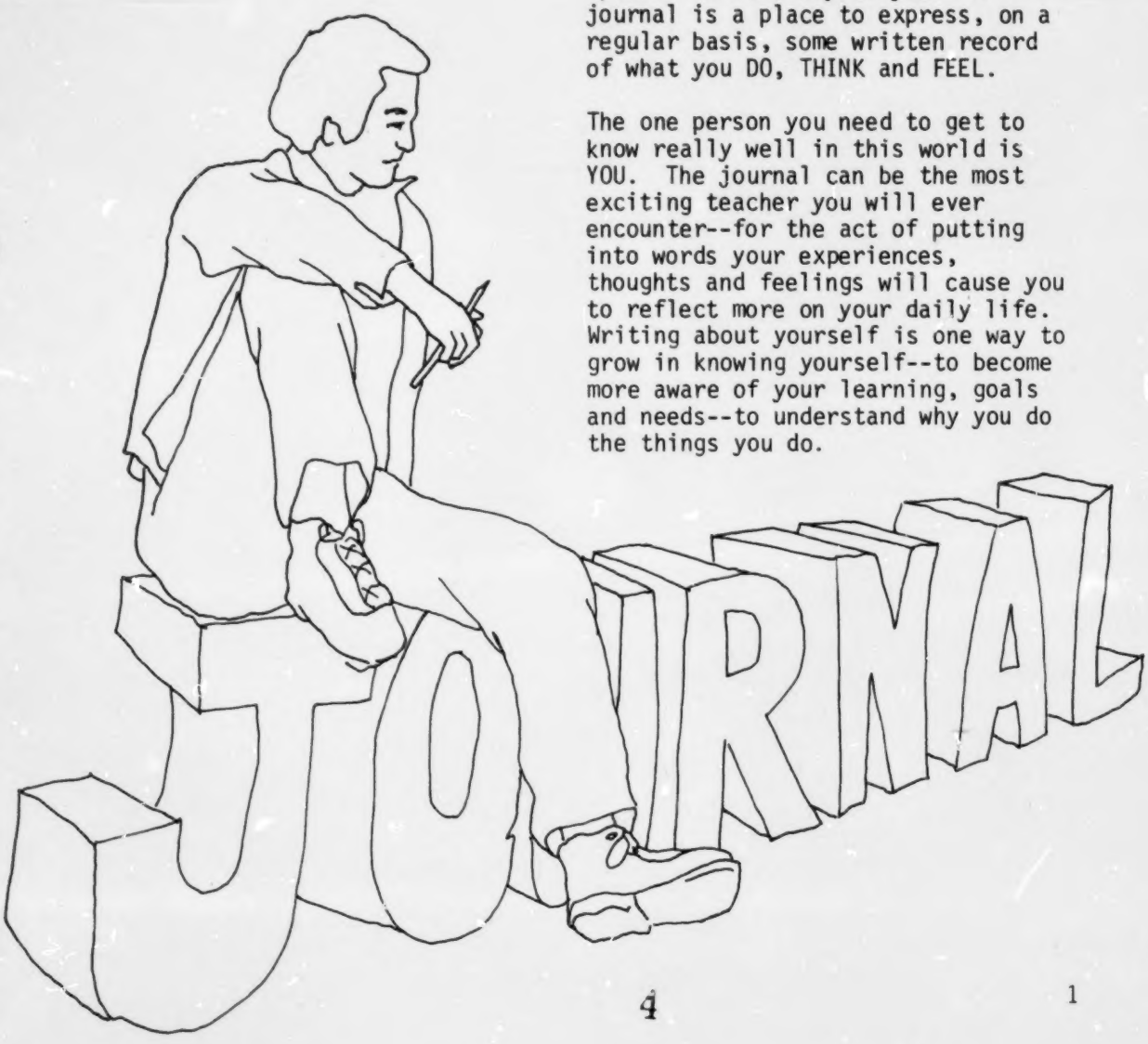
What Is A Journal?

What is a journal? Some people think it's a diary; others that it's a newspaper. It doesn't have to be either. It can be practically anything you like, as long as you're willing to do some writing.

IT'S ABOUT YOU

The journal reflects the contents of those moments in time that are personal or have special meaning for you--experiences from which you draw some understanding about yourself or your world. They are not necessarily grand or monumental, but they are special in some way to you. A journal is a place to express, on a regular basis, some written record of what you DO, THINK and FEEL.

The one person you need to get to know really well in this world is YOU. The journal can be the most exciting teacher you will ever encounter--for the act of putting into words your experiences, thoughts and feelings will cause you to reflect more on your daily life. Writing about yourself is one way to grow in knowing yourself--to become more aware of your learning, goals and needs--to understand why you do the things you do.



Whom Are You Writing To?

An important aspect of your journal will be the response you get from your correspondent--the person to whom you'll be writing. Your correspondent will be a teacher, a counselor or some other person you've selected who will be responding to your journal entries and helping you communicate better. While on the surface you are writing to your correspondent, underneath you will also be writing to yourself. The correspondent shares in this writing experience, but this does not mean that you must try to please someone else with your writing. It means that someone who is interested in you will be reading and responding to what you write.

Think of your correspondent as another part of yourself, and you will have the key to what is exciting, interesting and important to write about. It is very much like an internal conversation with a part of you that you may not know as well as you would like to.

You are not required to discuss anything in particular, nor are you expected to unburden your soul to the correspondent unless you feel that is what you need and want to do. The journal is YOU--let it say so, but be honest with yourself. Write what you think is important. Don't worry too much about style or correctness. Relax and enjoy your writing experience. You will be surprised at the results!

Getting Down To Writing

Remember, what is important is to share ideas, work out your thoughts or create. The journal is not so much a point-by-point description of your daily activities as how you think and feel about them. For example, don't just limit yourself to saying:

I overslept this morning and missed my bus so I was late to school. Mr. Lyon chewed me out because he had to explain to the lady at the Art Museum why I missed my appointment with the metal sculptor we'd arranged for me to interview. It was just an all around rotten day, but tonight Dan and I went out for pizza and talked till midnight so I feel better about life tonight. But I'm sleepy. So that's it for tonight.

You see? You already know what you did. Put the events of your life in a context of thinking and feeling, evaluate them a little bit. Did the experience change you, affect you in some way or give you a special insight? How do you feel about the situation? What do you think about it? What effects do you predict the experience will have on your future actions? Learn from what you write. The journal will inform you only to the degree that you inform it. Discover what is interesting to you by writing it down. Concentrate on your reactions, your observations and your judgments about what's happening to you.

For example, expand the situation shown on the preceding page in terms of how you might think and feel about it, and you will have something like the sample entry below.

I overslept this morning and that started the whole day off wrong. I had made an appointment at the Art Museum to interview a local artist, a man who does metal sculpture, and then I totally forgot about it. By the time I got to school they had already called Mr. Lyon to find out why I wasn't there. When he started chewing me out the minute I walked in, I just got mad. I was still steaming at the end of the day and needed to talk to a friend. So Jan and I went out for a pizza and had a long talk, till midnight in fact. It really helped me feel better. I guess I can understand why Mr. Lyon was mad at me because I did put him in an embarrassing spot. He had worked hard with the lady at the Art Museum to help arrange this interview. And then I blew it! Now he probably thinks I don't even care about meeting this artist, but I do. Well, I'll talk to Mr. Lyon tomorrow and maybe go to the Art Museum to work that out. Any suggestions on how to patch this up? I'm up too late again. I can't seem to pass up fun things even if it causes me trouble. I better get some sleep-!

What's Expected

It is hoped that your journal will be very much "you," inside and out. The following requirements, however, can help give you a sense of continuity and organization:

1. Use a special notebook or binder which you keep only for journal writing and save all your entries. The notebook will help you keep everything in one place so you and your correspondent can see what you've written before. You should turn in the entire journal to your correspondent with each new entry.

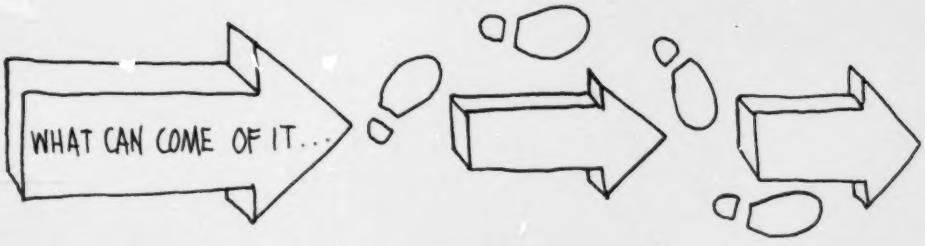
2. You are responsible for your journal.

   Don't lose it!

3. Turn in your journal each week. While your correspondent has your journal, you might find it important to keep notes to enter when your journal is returned.

4. Remember, your correspondent is another person who is listening to you with an open mind. Try not to waste anybody's time--most importantly yours--with trivia.

5. Your journal entries should cover at least two full pages for each week. Once you become involved with the process, however, you will probably go beyond this minimum.



You can expect two kinds of growth to result from writing regularly in your journal. First, your writing ability will improve, simply because you will be writing often.

Also, your ability to understand your experiences will deepen, both from the regular act of reflecting on and writing about what's happening to you and from the interaction between you and your correspondent. Your correspondent will be reading your journal in a serious attempt to understand what you mean, not in order to criticize or even evaluate your writing. If your correspondent is honestly puzzled by something you write, he or she may sometimes ask you to be more clear in your expression. But the journal should be a sincere dialogue between two people trying to understand each other.

Getting On With It...Hints And Tips

If your mind reaches a blank space and you feel there is nothing to write about, take a look at the ideas on the next few pages...

You may find something there that will turn on your imagination. If not, make something up. You can learn a lot about yourself from the simple process of trying to put words onto paper. That's what creation is all about--taking feelings and thoughts that might be drifting anywhere and finding something about them that pulls them together into something you can give shape to, whether it's just words strung out on paper, stories about what's happening to you or what you dream about. If you put your own time and energy into it, that's creation.

IT IS IMPORTANT THAT YOU DON'T LEAVE YOUR JOURNAL BLANK. Your mind is never empty. Even when you think it is there are things floating in there doing things to you. Ask yourself questions. What's hanging you up? Write about it. You might find out something new. . .

Form

There are many ways to look at yourself, to show feelings, to react to the world and your experiences. Just because your journal will be mostly in words, don't limit your expression to just one style or form every time you write. If you haven't experimented with different forms of writing before, do it now. Try writing in the form of a poem, a dialogue in which you imagine both sides of a discussion, a play, a speech, an interview or a dream. Try writing as if in the past or the future. You may prefer to write in prose (that's what you're reading right now) or stream of consciousness (writing down exactly what is going on in your here and now without using regular sentence structure, punctuation, logical sequences and so forth).

Whatever form feels comfortable to you, remember your original purpose of reflecting on your experiences and clarifying your reactions to them. For example:

Hi, Jane, how are you doing? Wow, what a bad day yesterday turned out to be! School was fine — I'm still thinking about our discussion of creativity. (Maybe I'll even get the nerve to try to make something soon. Maybe.) But going home was a monster! I told my mom I'd wash the car and my brother decided I needed a few instructions. Like, "Don't work too fast or you won't do it right." "Don't forget the windows." "You left the sponge in the drive way." He kept it up until I really felt like turning the hose on him. Sometimes he really makes me mad. Give me a few clues about why he does that. Just cuz' he's older?

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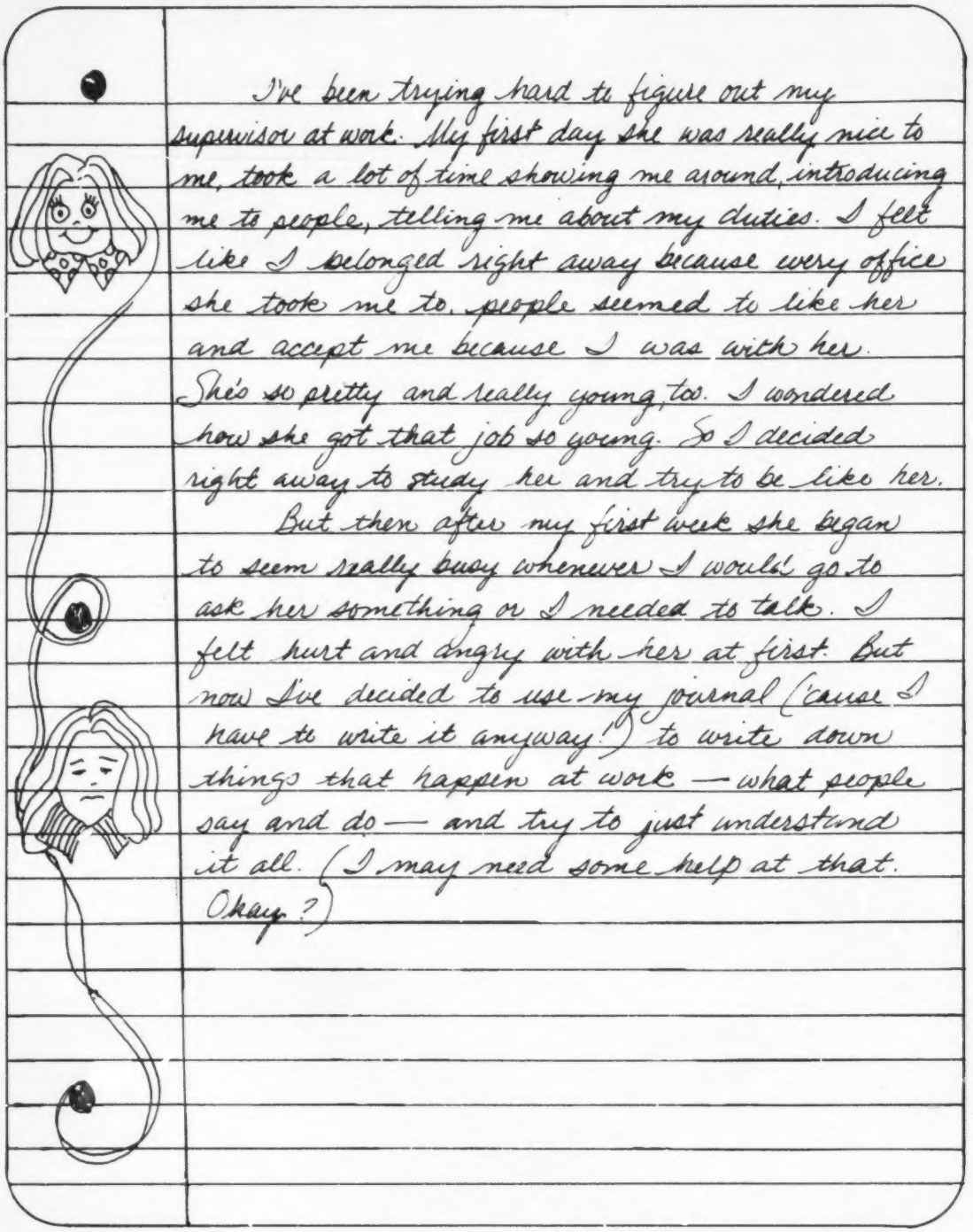
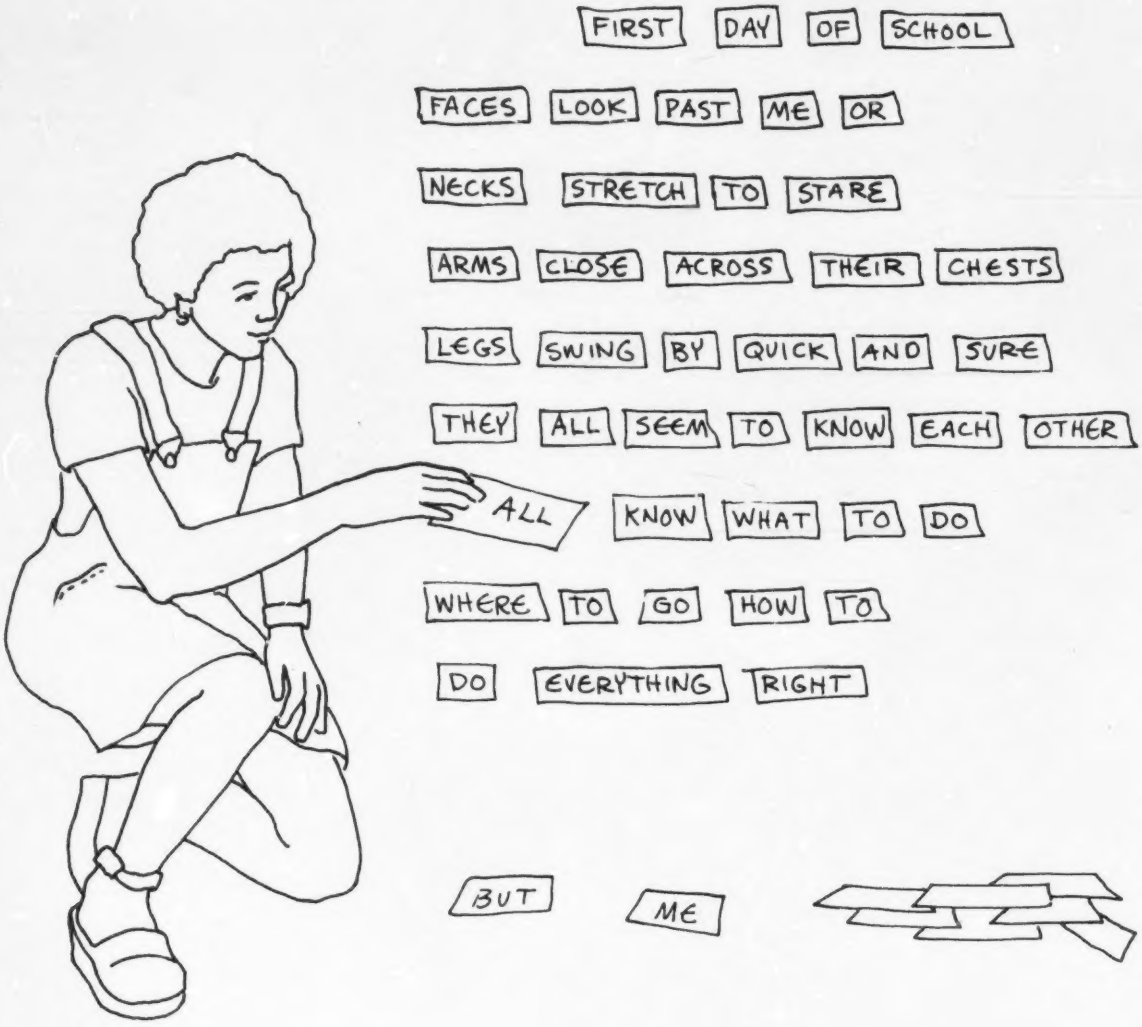
This student is using the journal entry to help her understand her emotional reactions to a changing job situation:



I've been trying hard to figure out my supervisor at work. My first day she was really nice to me, took a lot of time showing me around, introducing me to people, telling me about my duties. I felt like I belonged right away because every office she took me to, people seemed to like her and accept me because I was with her. She's so pretty and really young, too. I wondered how she got that job so young. So I decided right away to study her and try to be like her.

But then after my first week she began to seem really busy whenever I would go to ask her something or I needed to talk. I felt hurt and angry with her at first. But now I've decided to use my journal ('cause I have to write it anyway!) to write down things that happen at work — what people say and do — and try to just understand it all. (I may need some help at that. Okay?)

Playing With Words


FIRST DAY OF SCHOOL
FACES LOOK PAST ME OR
NECKS STRETCH TO STARE
ARMS CLOSE ACROSS THEIR CHESTS
LEGS SWING BY QUICK AND SURE
THEY ALL SEEM TO KNOW EACH OTHER
ALL KNOW WHAT TO DO
WHERE TO GO HOW TO
DO EVERYTHING RIGHT
BUT ME

If you are not sure how to go about writing a poem, read a few poets (maybe your correspondent can help with suggestions) and get a feeling for their rhythms and ideas. Then write a poem of your own.

A dialogue can take several directions. You can hold a conversation with another part of yourself that you don't show to most people, or you can imagine a dialogue with your correspondent. You may report an actual conversation you have overheard or taken part in. Or you can create two imaginary characters and report a conversation. Think of what you would most like to do after you finish school.

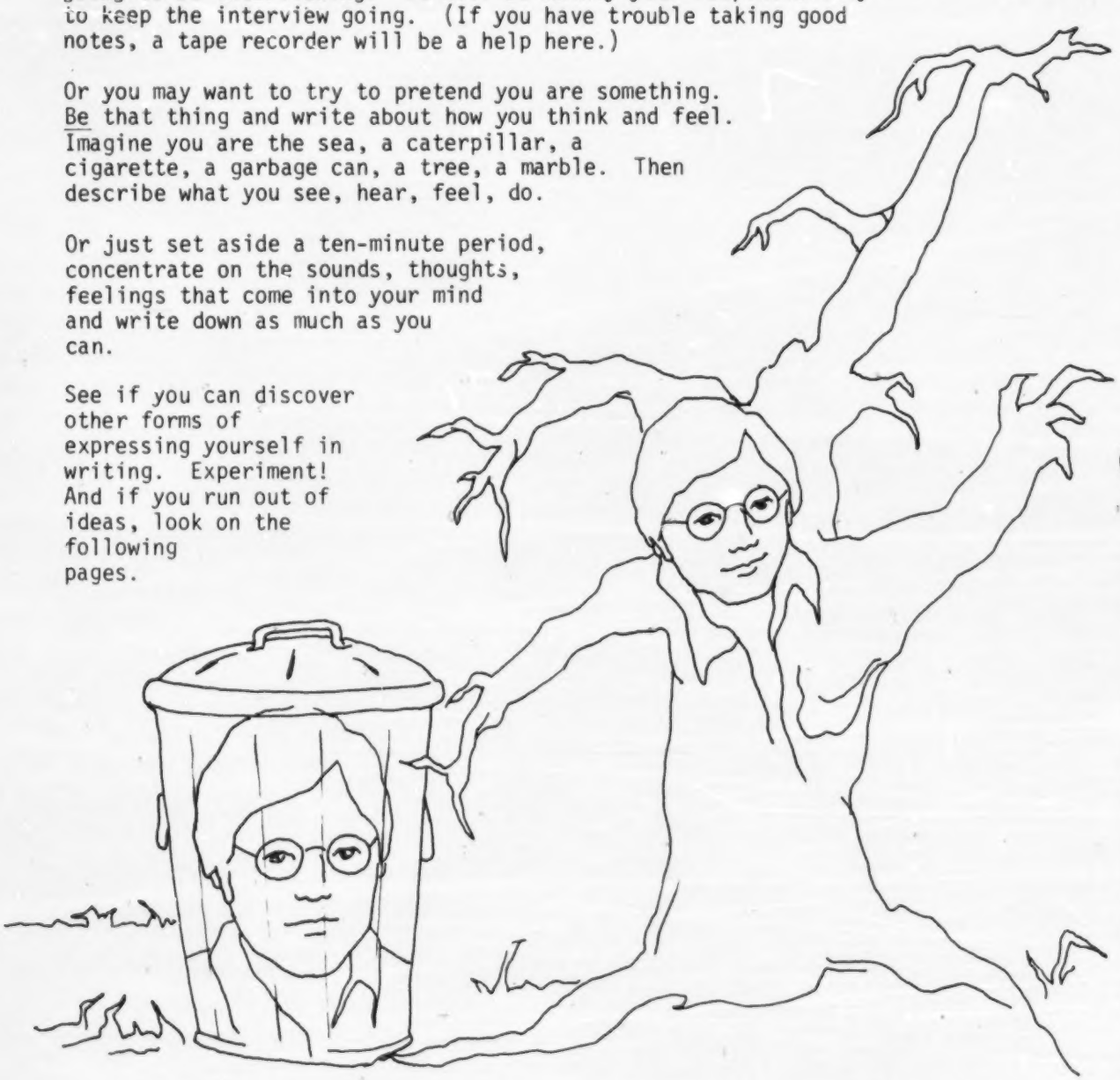
Imagine a dialogue between you as a job applicant and an interviewer for that job. Think of the thing you could say that would be most likely to get you hired. Now reverse roles: you're the interviewer--what do you want in a prospective employee? Try doing the dialogue in the form of a cartoon or comic strip. Try writing your own play with setting and directions.

Interview someone about something you are interested in learning about. Be sure to have some questions and ideas ready for the person you're going to be interviewing. It will be mainly your responsibility to keep the interview going. (If you have trouble taking good notes, a tape recorder will be a help here.)

Or you may want to try to pretend you are something. Be that thing and write about how you think and feel. Imagine you are the sea, a caterpillar, a cigarette, a garbage can, a tree, a marble. Then describe what you see, hear, feel, do.

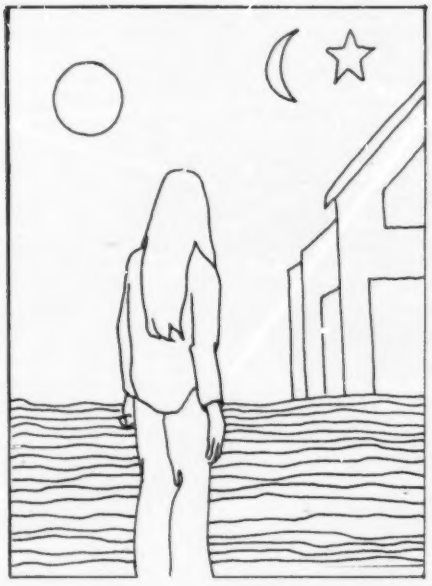
Or just set aside a ten-minute period, concentrate on the sounds, thoughts, feelings that come into your mind and write down as much as you can.

See if you can discover other forms of expressing yourself in writing. Experiment! And if you run out of ideas, look on the following pages.



Ideas

YOUR COMMUNITY PLACE



The Place

- ☐ What is pleasing about your neighborhood?
- ☐ What is distasteful about it?
- ☐ Rebuild your neighborhood so that it fits your view of the ideal.
- ☐ Describe your response to your surroundings at different times of the day (i.e., sunrise, noon, sunset, night).

The People

- ☐ What do people in your neighborhood believe in? What are they prejudiced about? How do they show these values?

- ☐ What kinds of work do you see? Which can you do? Which do you like?
- ☐ Interview some people in your neighborhood. Find out about their past, present and planned future. Try to describe their lifestyle, their dreams. Discuss why you think they made the choices they did.

What's Happening

- ☐ What neighborhood activities do you enjoy?
- ☐ What could you and your neighbors do together to make your community a better place to live?

Then What...

- [ ] Have you ever worked in your community? What kinds of jobs were you able to find?

- [ ] Do you think more jobs should be available for youth in your community? What kinds of jobs?

- [ ] Describe your view of a perfect job. Where would it be? What would you be doing? How much money would you make? What kinds of people would your employers be? How would you relate to your fellow employees?

- [ ] In your opinion, how does what you are learning at school relate to future employment? Do you feel you are being prepared for getting a job? Are there any suggestions you have which would make you feel better prepared?

- [ ] Write a story about a person who is unhappy in his or her job. Try to solve the problem in a realistic manner.

- [ ] How do TV images of careers and life compare to the way people live in your community? What kinds of similarities and differences do you see?

- [ ] Interview one of your parents and a neighbor about the work they do. How do they feel about their job? How would they change things if they could?

Ideas, Ideas

YOUR SCHOOL PLACE

The Place

- [ ] Describe how your school looks. How do you think the place contributes to your learning experiences? How would you change it if you could?

The People

- [ ] Describe someone in your school that you care about.
- [ ] What kinds of problems do you have in school? How did they get to be problems? Who could help? How?

What's Happening

- [ ] Has some new interest developed for you lately? Are you working on any special projects? How do you feel about them?
- [ ] Describe a recent day in school. Describe an ideal day.

Then What...

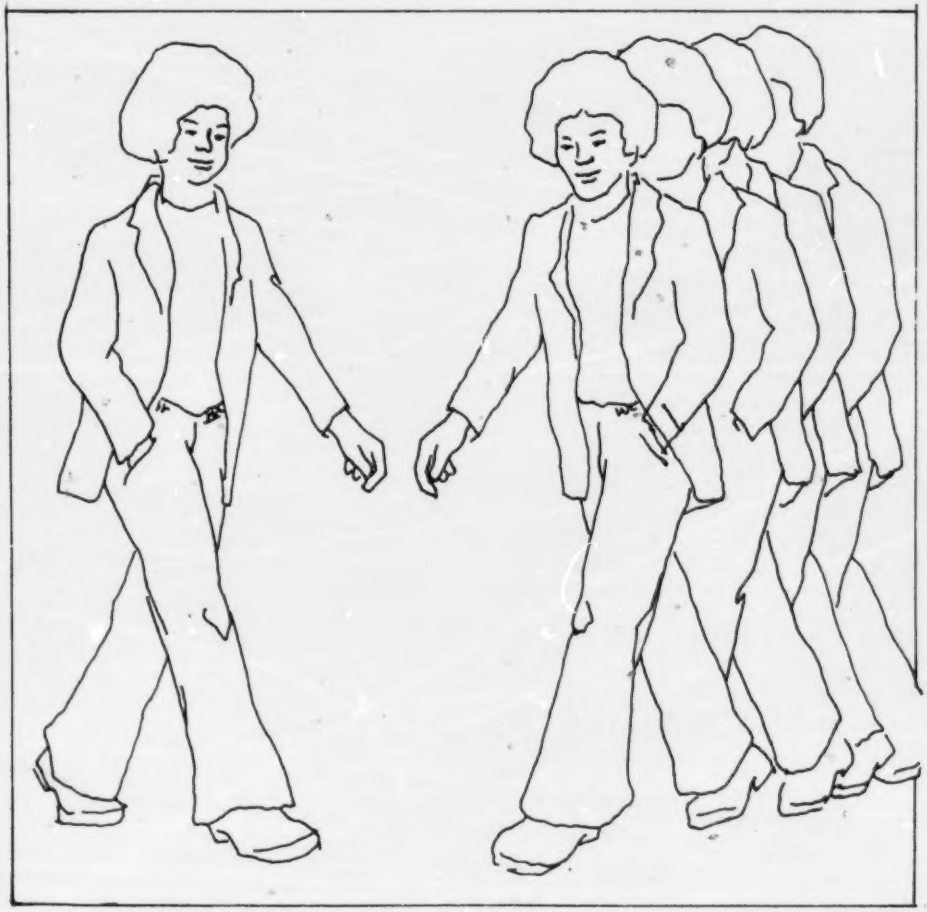
- [ ] What's worth knowing? How do you know? Why do you think so?
- [ ] Describe how you would teach a class for a week in a subject you choose. What activities would you plan? Why? Try choosing one class you like and one that you don't.
- [ ] Discuss the value of the subjects in which you are now enrolled. How does the content of these courses relate to your present and future plans? What would make it better?
- [ ] List your subjects in order of preference, and discuss why you ordered them that way.

Ideas, Ideas, Ideas

YOUR PERSONAL PLACE

Describe your SELF from as many points of view as you can.

- ☐ Discuss a response you've had to some recent media experience (TV program, newspaper article, music, movie, etc.).
- ☐ Discuss your personal reaction to a recent rap session you've had with (a) friends, (b) parents, (c) correspondent, (d) other teachers, (e) a stranger.
- ☐ Develop a thought or idea you have. Anything goes!
- ☐ Step outside yourself and describe YOU as if you were a stranger just meeting you.



- [ ] Get into any kind of emotional response you have experienced (i.e., anger, sadness, happiness, etc.), and describe it with color and life.

- [ ] Do you like being alone? What do you most like to do when you are alone?

- [ ] Discuss your hopes and fears, strengths and weaknesses. What relationship do these have to your life?

- [ ] Write down a dream or a fantasy you've had recently. Analyze its meaning to you.

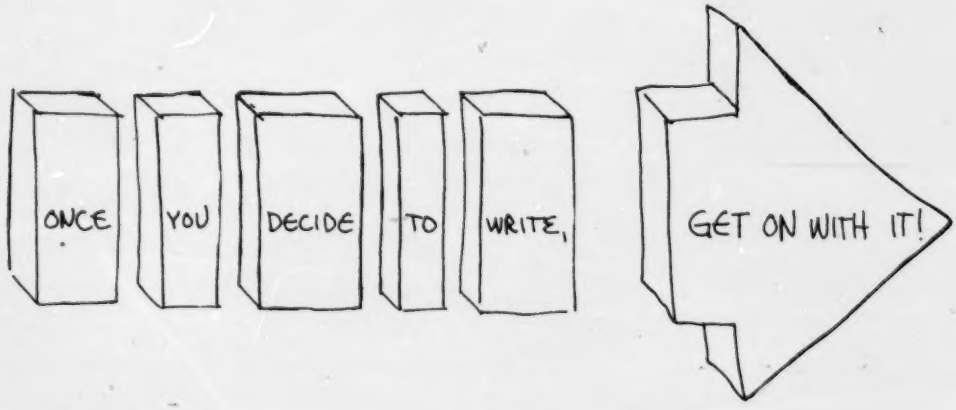
- [ ] Do you have a pet? Describe its personality and your relationship with it. Put yourself in its place and describe yourself and a day in your life.

- [ ] What kind of relationship with nature do you have? If you could spend your time anywhere in the world, where would you go and why? What would you do once you got there?

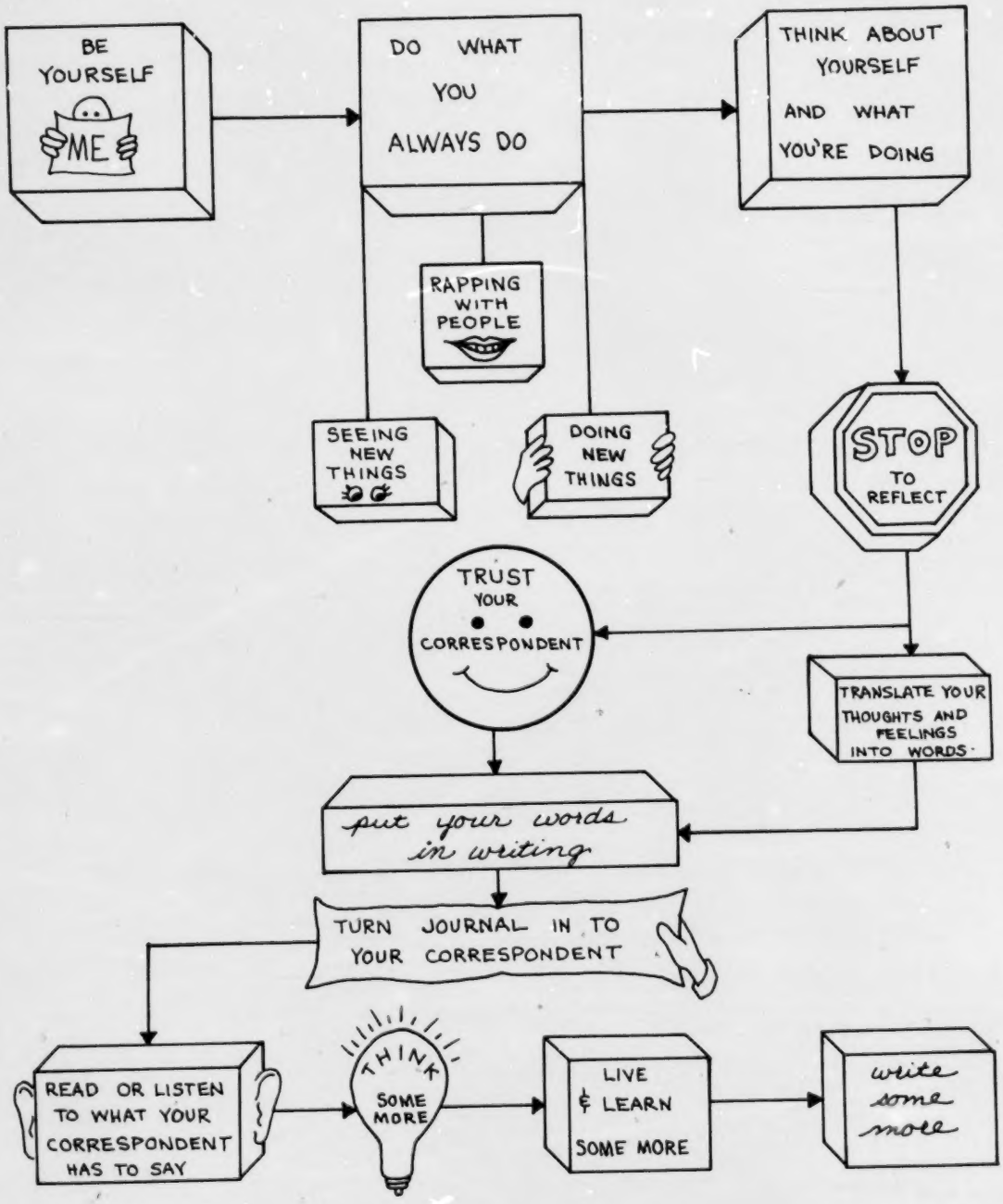
- [ ] Discuss something you dislike. Try to decide what it is within yourself that makes you feel as you do about it.

- [ ] Develop a method for relaxing. Give directions so that your correspondent can try it, too!

- [ ] Write a story in which you are the hero or heroine. Try to relate the story to future employment you hope to experience.



Writing a Journal


BE YOURSELF
ME
DO WHAT YOU ALWAYS DO
THINK ABOUT YOURSELF AND WHAT YOU'RE DOING
RAPPING WITH PEOPLE
SEEING NEW THINGS
DOING NEW THINGS
STOP TO REFLECT
TRUST YOUR CORRESPONDENT
TRANSLATE YOUR THOUGHTS AND FEELINGS INTO WORDS
put your words in writing
TURN JOURNAL IN TO YOUR CORRESPONDENT
READ OR LISTEN TO WHAT YOUR CORRESPONDENT HAS TO SAY
THINK SOME MORE
LIVE & LEARN SOME MORE
write some more